

IOWA OUTDOORS

Iowa Department of Natural Resources
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Feb. 25, 2003

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Mid Winter Ice Fishing

By Joe Wilkinson

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

It'll take more than last week's blast of snow and cold to knock ice anglers out of their well positioned buckets and shacks. A few inches of snow and a north wind don't hamper them much, when they've been drilling holes through a foot or more of ice in subfreezing weather.

As the weekend storm was blowing in, I was out on Coralville Reservoir with Jon Christensen and Dick Erenberger of Solon. On the ice about three times a week for the last couple weeks, Christensen, Department of Natural Resources fisheries technician based at Lake Macbride/Coralville, has seen a slow, but somewhat steady run of crappies through the ice this winter. "I look for fish in deeper water; with some sort of habitat. It's really a bonus if you have those trees or rock structure available. That adds forage and cover for those fish."

Drilling holes on top of a spot where they'd been having a little luck, the three of us crammed into the two-person nylon ice tent, near one of the rock walls that dot the Reservoir. Christensen's fish finder went into the water before he dropped a line. "If you have some way to locate the fish, you locate them; see if they're suspended," he explained. "If I'm fishing crappies, I try to get the jig above them."

As Erenberger pulled in a 9-1/2 inch black crappie, the first fish of the day, the red, orange and green blips on Christensen's Vexilar showed that he was on top of some structure; trees dropped there for habitat. His up-down jigging motion was a slow moving yo-yo on the electronic screen, six feet below the 12-inch ice floor. Eventually, another

red blip moved with it. “I can see the fish right under the jig,” Christensen pointed out. “You can see the fish coming up to the bait. It hit it once. I should have had him, but missed.” Setting the hook on one of the next light taps, though, his crappie was just about identical to Erenberger’s.

Another one followed, but fishing was slow on this midwinter morning. “This time of year, those fish can get really hard to catch,” admitted Christensen. “There are periods of good fishing, then slumps. You might have to finesse them a little; maybe change baits, change sizes.” A change of location helps, too, though ice fishing doesn’t lend itself to just moving a few feet down the bank. They moved downstream and caught a few more. The black crappies tended to run in the 9-inch range. White crappies were about 10 to 12 inches. The size and numbers are an early indicator of a pretty good year class shaping up for warm weather anglers on Coralville this year.

Across Iowa, those ice angling success rates vary. With earlier ice, Clear Lake anglers, for instance, have been out since December. DNR fisheries technician Scott Grummer says anglers are augering through up to 21 inches of ice. “It has slowed down a little. Our best fishing was when we had the first four to six inches,” he admitted. “It has improved a little. We’re seeing walleyes and yellow bass, mostly.” Grummer says bluegills and crappies are showing up still on Beeds Lake, in Franklin County and on Indian Lake, in southern Hancock County.

The winter bite picks up, as ‘ice out’ hits Iowa. That’ll go from south to north. Already, Lake Rathbun has lost a little ice cover. “We’re still at 8 to 10-inches, though,” relays Bruce Ellison, from the DNR’s Rathbun district office. He says fishing, especially for crappies, has been good throughout the winter. “Mostly over the tops of cedars dropped into the lake for cover; about 6 to 10-feet down,” says Ellison. “They average 9-10 inches. There is some sorting to release the littler ones.” He says an angler who can pull in a dozen or 15 crappies will likely have a 15-incher in the bunch, too.”

Ellison says anglers have reported pretty good luck fishing over Southfork Cove and Atwells on the northwest side of Rathbun, as well as in the bay near Honey Creek State Park on the north shore.

As winter stretches toward spring, ice anglers have a ‘third’ season ahead. “Typically, the fish’s metabolism picks up as the water warms a degree or two,” alerts Christensen. “Those fish will start moving toward the shallow bays, which warm up first as ice-out approaches. That’s where you’re going to find those fish, directly after ice out.”

Fishing Prospects Just Got Better on the Web

Iowa’s anglers can target their best fishing prospects with just a few mouse clicks now, on the DNR’s website. Go to www.iowadnr.com, and click on Fish and Fishing (left column). From there, you have choices ranging from the weekly fishing update to an electronic copy of the popular Iowa Lake Fishing Guide. There’s also information about fishing regulations, fish species, the state’s trout program and other rod-bending facts.

Sizing up Those Big Racks

Deer hunters have a second choice for getting their whitetail racks measured. Racks can be brought to the DNR District office, at Lake Darling State Park, March 3 and 4. Wildlife supervisor Don Pfeiffer will measure racks from noon until 8 p.m. or when the last one is measured for the day. Pfeiffer is a certified scorer for Pope and Young, Boone and Crockett, Longhunter Society and Iowa Trophy Deer.

Each rack should take approximately 20 minutes to score. If you wish a specific time, call 319/694-2430. The service is free of charge.

The Lake Darling office is three miles southwest of Brighton, in Washington County, on Highways 1/78.

There is also a free antler measuring session this Saturday, February 22, at Johnson County's Kent Park Education Center, from 1:30 to 4:30 p.m. DNR deer biologist Willy Suchy will present a program on Iowa's deer herd management at 1:30 at the center, 3 miles west of Tiffin on Highway 6. The Iowa Whitetail Classic, in Des Moines later this winter, also offers antler measurements, with a paid admission.

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WINTER STRESS IS CAUSING GIZZARD SHAD TO DIE

SOLON – Winter can be a difficult time for fish, especially fish like gizzard shad. Iowa is at the northern range for gizzard shad and the cold Iowa winters stress shad causing them to die. It happens wherever shad are found in Iowa.

“People are really aware of dead fish and when they see dead fish they think something must have killed them, well, in the case with gizzard shad, it is occurring naturally,” said DNR fisheries biologist Paul Sleeper. Sleeper, who works out of the Lake Macbride Station, is receiving a few calls a week about the dead 4 to 8-inch silver colored fish, and he expects the calls to increase as the ice begins to go off the lakes and rivers.

“It's a natural thing that happens every winter. The extent of the shad kill just depends on how severe the winter is,” he said.

The dead shad will serve as food for channel catfish in the lakes and will float downstream in rivers to open water where hungry eagles will dine. Not all shad in the system will die. Remaining shad will reproduce this spring and summer and fill the void.

Sleeper said the dead and dying shad would be getting caught in shallow rocky areas of streams, especially around low-head dams.

For more information, contact Sleeper at 319-624-3615.

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SNOW GEESE SEASON OPEN IN IOWA

RIVERTON – There is a special U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service conservation order that allows for a spring snow goose hunting season. In Iowa, that season is Feb. 1 through April 15. Hunters may take up to 20 snow geese per day, with an unlimited possession limit. Shooting hours are from one half hour before sunrise to one half hour after sunset.

Hunters may use unplugged shotguns and electronic calls during this conservation order and they must use non-toxic shot.

Hunters are required to have a small game license, habitat fee and the state migratory game bird fee, if normally required. Hunters are not required to have a valid federal migratory bird stamp.

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IOWA FISHING REPORT

For the week of February 25, 2003

www.iowadnr.com

For current information on fishing conditions for your lake or area, contact the office in that district. Phone numbers are listed with each district report. Ice fishing reports will be released every week while quality ice conditions exist.

Southwest

Three Mile (Union): Bluegills are good on wax worms early in the morning and later in the evening in flooded timber near roadbeds. Crappie and walleyes, with a few larger ones, are being caught on minnows fishing over brush piles at the lower and upper ends of the lake. Ice thickness varies from 6 to 10 inches, with some open water areas that the waterfowl are keeping open, so be careful.

Twelve Mile (Union): Walleyes are good in 10 to 15 feet of water using artificial lures. Bluegill, crappie, and small yellow bass are good on minnows and wax worms in early morning and evening hours in flooded timber or areas northeast of the west dock. Ice thickness varies from 6 to 10 inches with some open water areas, so be careful.

Fogle (Ringgold): Fishing is excellent for 6 to 8-inch bluegills, and for channel catfish and crappie on wax worms in flooded timber and brush piles.

Icaria (Adams): Channel catfish and largemouth bass are good on wax worms and minnows.

Green Valley (Union): Crappie and bluegill are fair in the east arm. Catfish are good. There is some open water at Green Valley.

Badger Creek (Madison): Fishing is slow. The best action for bluegills and crappies is in the morning and evening.

West Lake Osceola (Clarke): Fishing is fair for bluegill and crappie. The best action is in the morning and evening.

Little River (Decatur): Bluegill, crappie, and walleye are good in the flooded timber near the creek channel.

Slip Bluff (Decatur): Bluegills and crappies are good fishing near flooded trees.

Big Creek Lake (Polk): Bluegill fishing has been somewhat spotty. Most have been taken on small teardrops or kastmasters baited with wax worms. Crappie fishing has been slow to fair, with the best fishing around daybreak and after dark in deeper water using minnows on bare hooks. Some bluegill and crappie have been reported in the "Lost Lake" area. Walleye fishing has been good using kastmasters and other small jigging spoons. Most of the walleyes are below the legal length limit.

Don Williams (Boone): Crappie fishing is fair with most anglers using wax worms and minnows. Some bluegills are being caught, but overall fishing for bluegills is slower than for crappie.

Lake Ahquabi (Warren): Bluegill and redear fishing has been fair using wax worms. A few crappies are being caught, but overall fishing has been slow. Some channel catfish are also being taken with teardrops and wax worms; fish just off the bottom.

Hooper Lake (Warren): Some bluegill and redear have been caught with most fish in 12 to 15 feet of water.

Rock Creek (Jasper): Crappie fishing has been slow using wax worms and minnows. Ice conditions have been spotty with some areas of thin ice near the dam.

Easter Lake (Polk): Crappie fishing has remained slow, with most anglers using wax worms. A few largemouth bass have been taken along the face of the dam.

Hickory Grove Lake (Story): Some crappie and bluegill have been caught, although fishing is generally slow to fair using smaller lures tipped with wax worms and jigs.

Saylorville Tailwater (Polk): Walleye fishing has picked up, with most anglers using jigs.

Orient (Adair): Fishing is good for 9 to 12-inch crappies using minnows in front of the dam.

Greenfield (Adair): Bluegills are good on jigs tipped with wax worms fished around structure in 10 to 20 feet of water. Ice conditions are variable, so use caution.

Viking (Montgomery): Bluegill and crappie are good on teardrops tipped with wax worms and minnows. The best action is early in the morning and before sunset.

Willow (Harrison): Fishing is good for bluegills on wax worms.

Farm Ponds: Ice fishing is good for bluegill on wax worms. Ice thickness varies.

For more information on fishing in southwest Iowa, call the regional office in Lewis at 712-769-2587.

Southeast

Mississippi River – Pools 16 – 19: Backwater areas of the Mississippi on Pools 16 to 19 continue to have solid ice conditions. Anglers should use caution however, in deep water areas of **Big Timber** in Pool 17 or any place water current may exist. Fishing for bluegills is slow to good on **Big Timber** and **Hidden Acres** on Pool 17. Fishing for crappie and bluegills is slow to fair in **Bell's Pocket** in Pool 18.

Lake Odessa (Louisa): Most of the action has switched over to **Yankee Chute**. Bluegills and crappies both seem to be biting. Last week's warm weather and snowmelt has eroded the ice in a few places so be careful.

Lake Darling (Washington): Crappies are being caught in the middle of the lake around the cedar trees. The ice around Honey Creek and the other waterways was weakened last week by the snowmelt so watch where you walk.

Lake Rathbun (Appanoose): Crappies have been biting on small tube jigs and minnows. Areas with submerged structure or flooded timber have been the most productive.

Lake Keomah (Mahaska): Bluegills and crappies have been biting on small jigs tipped with a wax worm or minnow.

Lake Sugema (Van Buren): Bluegills and crappies have been hitting on small jigs tipped with wax worms. Fishing in the late afternoon has been the most productive. Use caution due to some areas of thin ice.

Lake Miami (Monroe): Bluegills and crappies have been hitting on small jigs tipped with wax worms.

Lake Macbride (Johnson): Crappie fishing continues to be fair throughout the lake using jigs tipped with wax worms and minnows. Some sorting is required for sizable fish. An occasional walleye is also being caught.

Diamond Lake (Poweshiek): Fishing continues to be fair in the evenings until dark for crappie and bluegills on jigs tipped with wax worms. Anglers are reminded that minnows are not allowed as bait in Diamond Lake.

Pleasant Creek (Linn): Anglers have been catching bluegills near the dam. Use caution, as there may be some open water in this area.

Coralville Reservoir (Johnson): Crappie fishing is fair to slow throughout the reservoir. Some anglers have been doing well while others are having limited success. Try fishing below the Macbride Dam, around brush, and deeper holes on jigs tipped with wax worms and minnows or small jigging rapalas.

For more information on fishing in southeast Iowa, call the regional office in Brighton at 319-694-2430.

Northeast

Mississippi River Pools 9-15: Fishing has been good in Pools 12 to 15. Bluegills and crappies are good in **Fish Trap**, **Kehough Slough**, and **The Springs** all near Galena Ill., in Pool 12. Fishing in Pool 13 at **Brown's Lake** has been good for bluegills, crappies and a few bass. Anglers are reminded that Brown's Lake is a catch and release area for bass. **Green Island** has been good for crappie and bluegills. **Spring Lake** and **Millers** have been good for crappie and some bluegills. Use caution, the ice conditions have changed. Places where there was 10 inches a week ago had only 5 inches on Sunday.

Volga Lake (Fayette): Bluegills are good in the mornings and evenings fishing near deep brush piles.

Lake Meyer (Winneshiek): Fishing is good for small and medium sized bluegills.

For current information on trout fishing during the winter, call the **Manchester Trout Hatchery** at 563-927-5736, the **Big Spring Hatchery** at 563-245-1699 and the **Decorah Hatchery** at 563-382-3315.

For information on fishing in northeast Iowa, call the regional office in Manchester at 563-927-3276.

Northwest

Reminder: The walleye, muskellunge and northern pike season closed on Feb. 15 on Spirit Lake, East and West Okoboji lakes in Dickinson County.

Spirit Lake (Dickinson): Spirit Lake has poor ice conditions on the east side of the lake. Foot travel is recommended. Yellow perch fishing continues to be good, but sorting is required to get a good number of 10-inch fish. Some bluegills are being caught at the North Grade and Angler's Bay.

West Okoboji (Dickinson): The best area for crappies and bluegills in Miller's Bay fishing in 10 to 12 feet of water.

Lake Minnewashta (Dickinson): Anglers are catching some nice bluegill and walleye.

Silver Lake (Palo Alto): Anglers are reporting catching crappies and yellow perch.

Dog Creek (O'Brien): Anglers are catching crappies during the evening.

Badger Lake (Webster): Fishing is good for 8 to 9-inch crappies on live minnows. The best action is early in the morning. Bluegills are good using teardrops tipped with wax worms. The bluegills are averaging 7-1/2 to 8-1/2 inches.

Black Hawk Lake (Sac): Bluegill and catfish are fair to good fishing off the rock piles and Ice House Point using teardrops tipped with wax worms. A few walleyes are being taken in the evening. Anglers need to use caution, there is open water on the north side and in the Dennison Beach area.

Brushy Creek (Webster): Fishing is good for 10 to 12-inch crappie on live minnows.

Clear Lake (Cerro Gordo): Walleye fishing is fair. The best activity is between 5:30 and 8:30 p.m. Jigging spoons tipped with minnow heads are working the best. A few yellow bass are being caught at sunrise and sunset on small spoons tipped with minnows or wax worms. The deep hole near the Island and the Lone Tree Point area has been the best areas for yellow bass.

For more information on fishing in northwest Iowa, call the regional office in Spirit Lake at 712-336-1840.

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